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PROCESS OF NATIONALISING COMMUNITY SCHOOLS IN MALI

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Résumé

Au Mali, les écoles communautaires sont des établissements scolaires à but non lucratifs ayant pour objectif de faire acquérir et développer des connaissances instrumentales et professionnelles. Elles sont créées et gérées par des communautés rurales, urbaines ou des associations. Depuis 2013, le gouvernement du Mali a entamé le processus de transformation des écoles communautaires en écoles publiques. Ce processus devrait avoir comme résultats le recrutement de tous les enseignants des écoles communautaires dans la fonction publique. Comme approche méthodologique de ce travail, une recherche ethnographique sur le terrain a été menée dans quelques écoles communautaires ainsi que l'analyse des derniers rapports sur les écoles communautaires par rapport à la question de leur transformation en écoles publiques. Les résultats obtenus à la fin de cette étude indiquent que toujours en 2020, plus de 2/3 de ces écoles communautaires étaient restées dans leur ancienne condition, c'est-à-dire gérées par les communautés locales, fonctionnant avec les mêmes problèmes comme l'absence locaux dans les milieux urbains. Bien que certaines écoles communautaires aient été nationalisées par le gouvernement du Mali dans le but de diminuer les dépenses des communautés locales en ce qui concerne le financement et la gestion, elles continuent de financer pour que les écoles puissent fonctionner. En plus, pour connaître le degré de compréhension des communautés en ce qui concerne l'importance des écoles communautaires, cet article se veut être une contribution qui fait l'inventaire de l'état de progression du processus de transformation des écoles communautaires en écoles publiques et en même temps les conditions d'existence des écoles communautaires nouvellement transformées en écoles publiques.

Mots clés : école communautaire, processus de transformation en école publique, crise, développement durable

Abstract

In Mali, community schools are non-profit making schools which aim at acquiring and developing instrumental and professional knowledge. They are created and managed by rural or urban communities or associations. Since 2013, the government of Mali has started the process of transformation of community schools in public schools. That process should have as results, the recruitment of all the community schools' teachers in the State civil service. Ethnographic fieldwork in some community schools and analysis of recent reports on community schools' transformation in public school are adopted as the core methodological approach of the study. Findings indicated that still in 2020, more than 2/3 of those community schools remained in their former situation, managed by local communities, having the same problems like the lack of proper premises in urban areas. Though some community schools have been nationalised by the government in order to reduce the charge of

local communities in terms of funding and management, still they must continue to pay in order to keep their schools functioning. In addition, to know the level of understanding of communities regarding the importance of community schools, this paper is a contribution making the inventory of the state of progress of the process of nationalisation of community schools in Mali and at the same time, the living conditions of newly nationalised school.

Key words : Community school, process of nationalising, crisis, sustainable development.

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Introduction

Mali is among the poorest countries in the World. In 2021, Mali occupied the 186th position among 191 countries¹. UN arranges Mali among the countries with weak human development because of the high level of Malian population living conditions or multidimensional poverty and vulnerability. The Sustainable Development Goals 4 target to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. The situation of educational lack and the difficulties for children to continue their schooling remain persistent because of disparity between areas, conflicts, instability and insecurity. The Sustainable Development Goals 1 target to eradicate hunger and extreme poverty, the situation of extreme poverty and hunger remain persistent because of disparity between areas, instability food situation due to climate hazards².

In Mali, community schools are non-profit-making schools which aim at acquiring and developing instrumental and professional knowledge. They are established and managed by rural or urban communities or associations³ in a common possession as opposed to an individual enterprise or corporations. While community schools were aiming at filling the gap related to the lack of formal education in rural areas, they have become part of both rural and urban areas in Malian formal education system.

“Community can refer to a territory or geographic entity. It could also refer to interpersonal and social connections based on shared interests, values, friendship network, etc.” (Anderson and Fridy, 2022, p.13). In that reference the sense of belonging to a local or national community there is also the trust. In the case of the transformation of community it is related to the trust of village communities running schools. It aims to reduce or remove the burden of the government in taking over the charge and responsibilities of the community school. Cohen (1982), Anderson (1991) and Seton-Watson (1997) talked about the sense of belonging of different communities in the context of a nation state.

In 2008, a national forum on education was organised in Mali, at the end of the forum, the participants made a request to government to transform community schools into public schools. Since 2012, the government of Mali has started the process of transforming community schools into public schools. To the government, such a transformation would improve the quality of education. That process includes the recruitment of all the community schools’ teachers in the

¹ UNDP Human Development Report 2021/2022, https://hdr.undp.org/system/files/documents/global-report-document/hdr2021-22pdf_1.pdf.

² Ibid., p. 29.

³ Jacques Marchand, Les écoles communautaires au Mali, IPE/UNESCO, 2000, p.42.

State civil service to support the low-level trained teachers in community schools. Unfortunately, by 2021, more than 2/3 of those community schools remained in their former situation, managed by local communities, having the same problems as the lack proper premises in urban areas. Likewise, in rural areas, because of the lack of means in terms of funding, two groups of different levels of pupils are put in the same classroom with only one teacher.

Though some community schools have been nationalised by the government in order to reduce the charge of local communities in terms of funding and management, they must continue to pay to keep their schools functioning. In addition to poor work conditions, 75% of those teachers remained on the payroll of the local population in terms of salary payment. That is why, some local populations having community schools continue to pay for school fees in order to provide a formal education to their children.

This paper seeks to make visible the importance of the community schools, documenting the state of progress of the process of nationalisation of community schools as well as the living conditions of newly nationalised schools in Mali.

Remote rural areas as well as poor urban neighbourhoods suffer from the lack of school infrastructure that is why they must create their own schools on behalf of their community. This paper directly addresses two themes of the Development Research: ‘promotion of inclusive and sustainable development in the frame of fighting against poverty’, and ‘human development’. It also addresses three priorities of Malian government and UN Sustainable Development Goals (2015): promote inclusive and sustainable development in the frame of poverty and disparity reduction for a peaceful Mali. It means that the study directly addresses several *Sustainable Development Goals* simultaneously: **Goal 1**: ‘no poverty’, **Goal 4** ‘quality education’, **Goal 5** ‘gender equality’.

In order to provide a good comprehension of the subject, the short presentation of the Malian educational system is relevant. The Malian educational system consists of four levels:

- **Preschool education and special education** which is provided by both private and public schools and by specialised educational institutions like the Institute of young blinds (IJA), Institute for deaf persons (AMASOURD), for persons with autism (AMALDEME), etc. It starts for the children from the age of three to five. From 2018 to 2022, the number of girls in preschool education was higher than that of boys everywhere in Mali except the region of Kidal (cf. Report of the Ministry of National Education -MEN-, 2022). According to the same report, there were 270 public schools against 752 community schools in 2022 in preschool education level.
- **Primary school.** In Mali, it starts from age of five or six and is composed of two cycles. The first cycle is six years and the second cycle three years.
- **Secondary school** is what is called *lycée* high schools or professional schools that are the intermediary level between primary school and higher education. And normal teaching school where primary school teachers are trained.
- **Higher education** is composed of the university and the institutes.

There are four kinds of education in Mali:

- **Non-formal education** including the *Medersas*, the Koranic schools, and other training and courses conducted in institutions with no links with the Ministry of Education.

- **Special education**, for example, for persons with disabilities and adult learning (the institute for the blind, the institute for the deaf, and courses in adult education).
- **General education** or formal education in Mali; it concerns all the primary schools and secondary schools, and tertiary education at the university.
- **Technical and professional** training at secondary schools which are different from the *lycées*. They run shorter training courses.

The aim and the framework of this study concern community school's transformation in public schools. In 2018, with approximately 1764 community schools officially recognised in by the educational authorities of Mali, only 148 were transformed into public schools. At the same time, the government of Mali estimated the official number of community teachers between 5660 to 6000 (Ministry of National Education, 2018). That number of teachers had to be recruited also in the same frame by the government in order to provide them the same salary treatment as government civil servants in the field of education. At the end of December 2016, in order to be focused on the process of transformation of community schools in public schools, the ministry of national education wrote a letter sent to all the regional directions that to momentarily stop the creation of new community schools. The reason given by the ministry of national education is that decision was motivated by the multiple conflicts linked to the management of community schools (MEN/SG, 2016).

Beyond the multiple difficulties related to the living conditions of the community schools, we are now the concerned by the transformation in public schools. In this paper three main concerns of community schools are analysed:

- The difficulty to know the exact number of community because every year there are new community schools created by villages because they need to have school and because of the conflict and security crisis in the country, in addition to the north and the centre, schools including community schools are forced to be closed by the Islamist groups.
- The slowness in the process of transformation of the community schools in public schools because of the generalised crisis of Mali impact primary education sector.
- The recruitment of community schools' teachers to have the same work condition as other civil servants.

The aim of this study is to give a new orientation to the research dedicated to community schools. Community schools should be fully transformed in public schools before 2019. The relevance of this work is that it will reveal the number of community schools that still appear separately in all the report made by the local schools' authorities called CAP (Centre of Pedagogical Animation). Since 2012, Norway, Sweden and Denmark continue to support Mali in funding several needs in the sector of primary education.

Some research questions guided the reflection during this study. How the process of transformation of community schools in public schools can be linked to the priorities of Malian government? Those priorities are also related to some Sustainable Development Goals (**Goal 1**: 'no poverty', **Goal 4** 'quality education') like promoting inclusive and sustainable development in the frame of poverty and disparity reduction for a peaceful Mali (SDG, 2015).

How the current situation of schooling in Mali in a context of generalised crisis and conflict in the north and centre and some regions of the west and the south of the country can be analysed? How to deal with the analysis of the causes, the current situation of the non-transformation and

its consequences on local population? Finally, this study examines how the government of Mali can manage to safeguard education and continue with the process of transformation of community schools in public schools with the ongoing security crisis and conflict.

1. Methodology

Ethnographic fieldwork in situ and analysis of recent reports on community schools' transformation in public school has been the core of my methodological approach. The study is based on qualitative data collected in the field interviewing the persons in charge of community schools I studied from 2008 to 2012 and later, in addition to several reports of local schools' authorities at rural commune level. I have been in some community schools in the villages of the commune of Ouélessébougou where I discussed with the current school principals and teachers and also parents in the community schools.

In a kind of informal interview, I had discussions in which I ask the background of their schools, the date of creation as community school and the current running conditions of the school. Students' parents explain how they continue to support the burden of schools despite the fact that some former community schools are officially known as having the status of public school but not having the required number of school-teachers. In order to diversify the point of views of the different protagonists, I have interviewed two heads of Centre of Educational Training (CAP), two elected members in the city council in the urban area of Bamako and in the rural area of Ouélessébougou. In two villages, I have also discussed with the head of the village in order to understand the level of involvement of villagers in the management of their community school. But my interviews were mainly focused on teachers because they know the situation better than anyone else for living it in their daily life.

Regarding the different reports analysed, I have been comparing the different figures of different years in order to see the evolution of the number of community schools transformed in public schools, the number of teachers concerned and the number of pupils affected by the overall process of transformation. In addition to those interviews and reports, several literature, newspapers and international reports on Malian educational situation have been used. Anderson and Fridy (2022) address the issue of the sense of community. The sense of community relationship with civic/political activity complements existing models of participation that relies on individual characteristics as explanations for different types of political behaviours (Anderson and Fridy, 2022, p.11).

2. Presentation of Findings

The population of Mali is growing fast. The growth rate of children under the age of 15 years, is estimated to be 3.6 per year, representing 49.8% of the Mali population in 2016 (PopulationData.net, 2021). Children at the age of schooling, less than 15 years old represented 47% of the population in 2009 (RGPH, 2009). The number of school going age children has reached half of the population of Mali in 2022, which is 21741891 (<https://countrymeters.info/fr/Mali>, 2022). With the increasing number of the children population in need of schooling, the sector of education needs tremendous investment in order to be equal to the challenge. According to the law, in Mali education is free and compulsory until the age of 16 (Loi 1999). How education can be compulsory and free while the government cannot cover schooling needs even only in urban areas? Community schools were initiated because the number of public schools was not enough in the country to fulfil the needs of

population in terms of schooling especially at primary school level. With all the problems of functioning, the only solution proposed by the population and accepted by the government was to transform all the community schools in public schools. But the process of transformation also requires to recruit community schools' teachers as civil servants. That is the source of another problem. Only 20% or less of the community schools' teachers are qualified with an accepted diploma. To be allowed to teach in Mali at the primary school, you need to have a degree from the institute of training schoolteachers (IFM) or to have any other four years degree in any kind of professional or technical secondary school.

Most of the teachers of the community schools do not have any degree to be qualified as schoolteachers. But because of the lack of qualified teachers, they are hired by community schools. Despite the fact that they do not have any official degree as school-teachers, they think that they should be recruited by the government as civil servants. They complaint that they have been spending several years working for community schools, so the government should recruit them as civil servant in the frame of the process of transformation of community schools in public schools. "The government considered us as useless whereas we worked for community schools for more than 20 years, this is unbelievable and unacceptable for us" said (I.T., community schoolteacher, 2019). The government was aware that the level of the education provided in community schools is very low due to the qualification of the teachers. The explanation of that low level of teachers working for community schools is because when the local population in lack of school creates their schools, they must recruit and pay the teachers' salary. The job as community school's teacher is not attractive at all because the salary is very low. Another reason is because young jobless and underqualified people willing to fulfilling the lack of qualified teachers work as community school teachers. As a schoolteacher expressed his anger: "we have dedicated all our live to community school teaching. I have spent more than 22 years teaching in a community to help the education in Mali, but the government refuses to recruit me as civil servant because I am over 40 years old" (B. C. community schoolteacher). In addition to the problem of adequate degree, there is also that of the age, some teachers were not accepted because of the limitation of age. Only teachers at community schools below the age of 35 years old could apply to become civil servant teachers following the transformation of the community schools.

Besides the fact of having inadequate degree or confronted to the limitation of age, being over 35 years old, all the community schools' teachers fulfilling the conditions of adequate degree and being younger than 35 were recruited as civil servant teachers.

Another problem was the conceptualisation of community schools in urban areas particularly in Bamako the capital city of Mali. There is a perception that community schools in urban areas like Bamako cannot claim to be in the situation of extreme poverty. This is based on the argument that urban community schools ask each student to pay 2000 to 2500 CFA francs (3 to 4 €). The community school in urban area also pay for the school premise, because of the difficulty for urban area to access a free space to build a community school. Idrissa Soïba Traoré (2017) believes that we cannot talk about extreme poverty because in public school the annual contribution is only 1500 CFA francs (less than 3 €) which is less than the monthly fee of an urban community school. But Traoré who is referring to my work made on community schools previously in both urban and rural areas did not mention the fact that I have clearly demonstrated that following ethnographic research that parents do not choose to put their

children at community schools in Bamako. But they do it because public schools are overcrowded and are quite far from them (cf. Bagayoko, 2016). The key argument is that community schools disappear by themselves in urban areas. Because all the time community schools in urban areas have been asking the city council to provide them a place where they can build their school without being successful. Given that there are several community schools in one commune or sometimes in one neighbourhood, the city councillor says that it is not possible to provide a land to all of them. That decision of the city council was in some way logical because according to the law, community schools are considered as semi-private schools.

The point is with the new deal in the process of the transformation of community schools, since the aim is to serve villages in quality education where there was no public school, community schools in urban areas are now free to transform their schools in classical private schools to clearly make profit. In fact, community schools in urban areas were managed by associations which represent a sector of a neighbourhood as a part of the community while those of rural areas are managed by the whole community. The idea of community running a school in a village is of course difficult because of different hindrances. But, still the concept of community is less imagined in rural village community school context as it could be in an urban neighbourhood (cf. Anderson, 1991).

Population and associations owning the former community schools in urban areas of Bamako like Sabalibougou would manage to find the balance between what they used to consider as community schools and what they have now as profit-making private schools despite the situation of extreme poverty in the neighbourhood. Efforts to improve the quality and the accessibility of education to the population in Mali shall take into consideration the situation of extreme poverty of population (cf. Bagayoko, 2016). Because, in both urban and semi-urban areas, middle class and rich families do not need to struggle to school their children because they can easily pay for private schools.

To confirm that community schools seem to be inclining to side of private schools. It is said by the law n°2012-013 of February 2012 addressing the issue of preschool, primary and secondary education affirms that a private school is an entity of private law which participates to the mission of public service of education. Moreover, community schools are private schools created and managed by communities or associations (Loi n°2012-013, art.5).

Globally, in Mali, families are supporting the state in its role and duty of guaranteeing schooling to children. In 2015, the burden of the families in education support is estimated 72.4 billion CFA francs (130.2 million US \$) the equivalent of 20.7% of the expenses made by the government in the sector of education (UNESCO, 2021). *Sustainable Development Goals* **Goal 1**: 'no poverty' is difficult to meet with the burden of education fees of poor families. Regarding **Goal 4** 'quality education' is also far be reached because the difference of quality is very huge between some private schools and public schools. The difference is extremely huge when it comes to compare private schools and public schools to community schools. Because in the community schools, the quality is very low with less qualified teachers. The positive point is that **Goal 5** 'gender equality' is slightly met because some schools' rate of girls' schooling is equal or higher than the rate of boys because in 2022, the number of girls registered in community schools was 17797 against 17675 boys.

3. Discussion

During my previous research, I was wondering if the spectre of private schools is not haunting the community schools in the mind of populations in urban areas like Bamako the capital city of Mali (Bagayoko, 2016, p. 73). The community schools in Bamako like those of Sabalibougou were on their way to be transformed in private schools. They just gave the names of their teachers who were paid by the *Centre of Educational Training* (CAP), school local department of the ministry of national education to be recruited in the civil service as teachers. That situation created two problems in urban area.

The first is that the school fee of community schools which was less expensive than that of classical private school has become higher because they do not receive any support from the ministry of national education due to their new status of being fully private. The quality of the education of the community schools transformed into private schools could remain very low because of the *low-cost teachers*⁴ they used to keep their positions as school-teachers. The compulsory norms of practice like having good facilities with adequate school premise, classrooms, toilets, playground for children, etc., cannot be met by the newly transformed private schools. So, in 2021, the right to education for all the children even in urban area is not provided (cf. Antonioli, 1993).

The second problem is that most of the community schools in urban area do not belong to the whole community. It does not belong to all the inhabitants of an urban neighbourhood like in the case of a small village. Community schools in Bamako were created in most cases by an association in one area of a neighbourhood in need of education for their children. So, some people struggled to establish a community school in their area, but after its establishment, they were not participating in its management like being a member of the board committee or taking part in the general assembly summoned by the management board. There is a feeling that the school is the property of one person who can exclude the other members of the association with whom he/she created the school.

During our recent field work among those community schools transformed into private schools, we have seen some cases in Torokorobougou and Sabalibougou. In those two neighbourhoods, a group of youth association went to see the head of the neighbourhood to intervene in order to recuperate a community school transformed in private school. The youth would like to have their school as a property of all the association members instead of being their property of only one person. In the case of which the land of the school belongs to the whole neighbourhood as public space, the issue becomes complicated. That was the case of the former community school called *26 Mars* in the neighbourhood of Torokorobougou. In that case, the land of the school was registered on the name of a person who was the president of the board committee at the creation of the community school in 1994. With the unexpected situation which forced community schools in urban areas to become independent, the former president of the board committee of the school claimed the ownership and kept it as his individual property. The youth of the sector went to see the head of the neighbourhood as traditional or customary authority

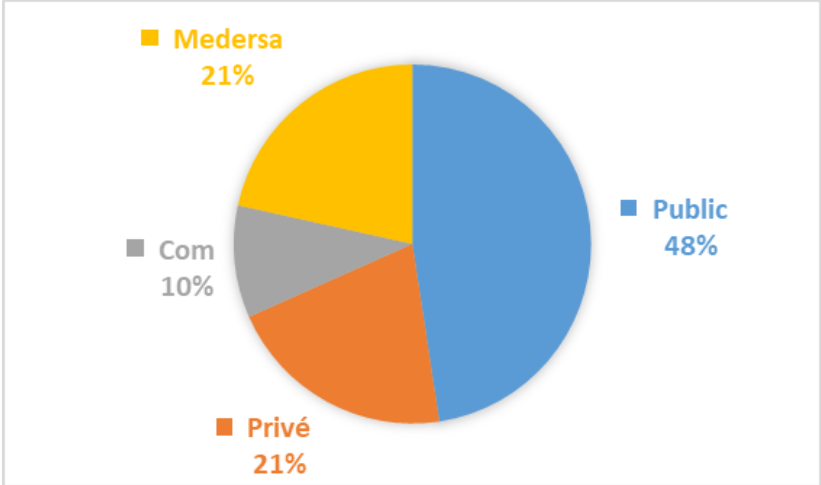
⁴ I used this term low-cost teacher because when it comes to remuneration, community school's teacher earns less than four times the salary of a public-school teacher who is a servant and at least two times less than a teacher at a middle status private school.

and the mayor as elected political authority to try to find a solution for the problems of school 26 Mars. Despite the different interventions, the former president did not accept to give up and let the school being the common property as private school. They ended up to the court to decide. In 2022, they were still waiting for the decision of the court if the school would get back to the association of the sector in expropriating the former president of the board committee or not.

When it comes to community schools in general, the majority are in the rural areas. In the rural communes of Ouélessébougou and Sanankoro-Jitoumou where I did the research, there were 17 community schools in 2012. In 2022, there were 12 community schools’ local department located in the commune of Ouélessébougou, (Annual report of the *Centre of Educational Training* (CAP). That figure shows that only five community schools of the seventeen were transformed into public schools, which represents about only 30% of community schools. The rest of the community schools which have not been transformed into public schools yet are confronted to the same problems as before like the lack of infrastructures and qualified teachers which is the most important one. Some of those community schools are in the risk to be shut down all the time because of poverty, parents do not pay properly or not all the school fees destined to pay schoolteachers are embezzled: “We cannot continue to offer school fees of our children because of the poverty, our priority is to have food, with drought we do not have the same yield. For the lack of payment teachers are abandoning their position, I think that they are right nobody wants to work for free” (S.S., student’s parent in NKorobougou, 2019).

According to the figures of the Ministry of National Education of Mali, in 2022, there were out of 14653 primary schools in Mali, there were 1480 community schools (MEN, 2022). From 2018 to 2022, the number of community schools decreased from 1837 to 1480. That means, 357 community schools were transformed into public schools. But, in practice, because of the need of education facilities in rural areas, there are new community schools opening every year. At the same time, there is a huge number of community schools in urban areas which was transformed into private school but not into public. Official statistics are still considering those community schools transformed in private schools.

Figure 1: Percentage of primary schools according to their status in 2021 – 2022 (MEN, 2022).



Source: Report 2022 of the Malian Ministry of National Education (MEN).

The numbers of community schools went from 156537 pupils in 2018 to 154916 pupils in 2022, the Ministry of National Education estimates that because of the gradual transformation of community schools into public schools. But it is also important to note that some community schools were closed because of the terrorist groups involved in the center and the northern regions of Mali. Mobile community schools which used to educate children of nomadic families by following them in their camps, were closed because of insecurity going on in the north and the center regions of Mali. Perhaps this explains why, several community schools' pupils are not counted anymore. Conflicts going on in Mali have seriously affected the education sector. From 2018 to 2019, 926 schools were attacked and forced to close in the region of Mopti, center of Mali (Cluster Education, 2019).

Conclusion

In 2007, the number of community schools in Mali 2175 and that represents 17.40 % of total number of schools in Mali including public schools and private schools. In 2017, 6.3% of primary schools were students at community schools (UNESCO, 2021). That percentage seems to be very underestimated. Because, in 2019 the private sector represented 30 % of primary schools in Mali and 2022 the private sector of education represents 57% of the total number of schools and follow the community schools 24 % (Cellule de planification et de statistique, MEN, 2022). The percentage of 24% of community schools is including in the 57% of the private sector of education because the government has always classified community schools in the cluster of private schools.

The *Sustainable Development Goals* aim to fight totally against poverty, to have a secured education environment and so on. The goals or the content of the goals mentioned here are strongly related to the issue of community schools in general and the issue of transformation of community schools particularly in public. In addition to mobile community schools used to provide schools to nomad families children, with insecurity and armed conflicts in the north and centre regions of Mali hundreds of schools have been attacked and shut down by the terrorist groups intending to impose religious education model. So, schooling in Mali is still suffering according to Gerard Dumestre (Dumestre, 2000).

The community schools in urban areas of Mali were already accused to be expensive because the school fee was very high compare the monthly contribution in rural areas. Because of the high fee of community schools in the urban area of Bamako, there was a confusion about the real difference between community schools and private schools. The process of the transformation of community school has been a kind of clarification. Community schools in Bamako have stopped to exist as having their former status, they have become private schools effectively.

However, the government of Mali is showing its good will to reach its goal of transformation of community schools into public schools. The government was aware that after ten years of commitment to transform community schools into public schools, less than a third in terms of transformation was successful. Now, the government has changed its strategy and aims at

transforming all the community schools into public schools following the targets of the PRODEC⁵ II 2019-2028.

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⁵ (Programme Décennal pour le Développement l'Éducation et la Culture), Ten-Year Program of Development of Education and Culture is a strategic planning of the national policy of education system recondition from the period of 1999 to 2009. The latest is the Ten-Year Program of Development of Education, which aims at improving education management in terms of quantity and quality. This program was reformulated in 2009 with the objective to achieve universal primary education. It was reformulated again from the period of 2009 to 2019 and most recent reformulation was in 2019 and planned from 2019 to 2028 and one of its main aims is to address the issue of education quality in transforming all the community schools in public schools before the end of the program in 2028, what they call the horizon 2030.

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